is but seldom employed upon works of great magnitude, no reflection of want of capacity can justly be cast upon *them*: the cause is the want of opportunity.

Amid a vast deal of public liberality and private charity, there is always an unfortunate parsimony shewn in our great public works; the pruning knife of a false economy is sure to be applied to them either as regards scale, or material, or ornament. We must not attempt to suggest remedies for a deficient exchequer, that is a problem the wisest politicians seem unable to solve; but this is certain, that there is talent enough in the country to meet any ordinary demand upon it when not crippled or impeded by favouritism or indecision. A few of the most important works in progress will bear out this assertion.

It is to the influence of the press that we must trust for a continuation of the march of liberal and enlightened opinions, certainly now on the advance. Much has been done, but much remains to be done.

Not long ago the opinion of our continental neighbours was adverse to us as a musical nation, but by a strange retribution the very same detractors are glad to seek a refuge in the only city in the world capable of supporting, besides its own theatres, the vast expense of two Italian operas at once, and affording to patronize, in the season, an amount of benefit concerts and foreign and native artists without parallel!

Let us hope, then, that ere many years our principal cities may be as famous for beauty as for commerce, and that as high a reputation may accompany us for refinement in art as for superiority in enterprise.

Alex. Fred. Ashton.

ON THE INFLUENCES WHICH TEND TO RETARD THE PROGRESS OF THE FINE ARTS.*

We endeavoured on a former occasion to advocate a rigorous and rational study of art, that the mind might be habituated to acquire principles.† It is not urged under a belief that a receipt can be given to which all productions should conform—such an idea is too absurd to be entertained by any one: it was rather to enforce the necessity of all resources being brought to bear by the artist in order to render his works as near perfection as possible. It is in the arts, we fear, that man, in his pride, believes himself to have escaped the trammel of rules,—that here, at least, he is independent and self-sufficient, transcending mundane control. This has led him to rest contented with the mere surface of things, instead of studying the ordered nature of the world he has to pourtray:—yet a maxim with regard to his study of the human figure, one would have thought, ought to have taught him that it is as essential in the general survey of nature as in this particular one, to understand, as it were, the thews and sinews—the anatomy (if it may he so expressed) of the universe.

At a time when it is so often said that the attention ought to be directed to one object—"that art is long and life short"—that it is impossible to succeed in all, or that it is injurious to extend the field of our inquiries—we almost falter and tremble at the truth asserted; but when we recover and look around at the result of that one-sidedness—that "learning to hop on one leg," as Mr. De Morgan expresses himself, on the system of education which is generally pursued—tying up the weaker faculty, and continually exercising the stronger, till they become more and more disproportionate,—is to produce an unbalanced, unhealthy condition: we say, after witnessing the results of such a course, it gives fresh courage—for reason will point out that the right course is to exercise those faculties which are weak in order to raise them as near as possible to the standard of the strong: these will always take care of themselves.

Look at the results of this system as pursued in the splitting up of science and of art: a man on this system concentrates himself (as he terms it), on a particular section of science or art. It might perhaps be called concentration by some, if a man were to take a telescope and limit his observations to a few degrees of the heavens—think you his knowledge would be eminent of that space to which he confined himself? Yet this is precisely the method adopted by the observers in the universe of inquiry, so that each acquires only a partial knowledge of a part.

This is indeed not concentration, but isolation: concentration is bringing all the rays of the light of knowledge to a brilliant focus. "Genius," says Reynolds, "is a mind of large general powers, accidentally directed to some particular pursuit," and when the giants of past times are recalled to our memory, they bear testimony to the truth of the definition: the large general powers of which he speaks, be it remembered, can only be acquired by diligent study. It needs only to bring to mind the names of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raffaelle, as examples in an age when general knowledge was not so correct and easily attainable as at present; and may it not reasonably be concluded that this general information, this versatility, raises the critical power, rendering its possessor less easily satisfied, ever leading him to strive after perfection, stamping his works with that pains-taking fervour which excites our admiration and respect. The system we have been warring against spreads itself through society, and produces that selfishness and want of sympathy with the pursuits of others; whereas, if all possessed more extended knowledge, they would profit in having more enlarged views of their own, and society would be bound together by community of sympathy and interest in truth; but at present it has no common faith, nor common principle of any sort to knit it firmly together, except it be fear, and that is a fetter of hate, rather than a bond of love. Although we have touched upon the theories which the artist builds upon the past, it is, as we have said, his field for speculation rather than the ground of his action: there are more recent actuating principles, more modern examples which influence his practice. Two of those who are considered as exercising the most important influence will be briefly considered, viz., Sir J. Reynolds and Flaxman.

After the perusal of Reynolds' lectures, the reader does not feel impressed with any unity of purpose, although it may be discovered, on a more rigid examination, that their chief intent was to expose the evil of entertaining mystical notions, the fallacy of the artist's belief in inspiration, and in his sublime and divine genius: the necessity of counteracting this tendency is enforced in various portions of them, by urging that art ought to be established on a more scientific basis. It is evident, however, they were intended to be suggestive only, for had the chief aim of his convictions been carried out to its full extent, we feel assured that clearer views would have been possessed both by the public and the artist, so long a period having elapsed since their publication; the cause of the argument in support of his scientific view, being scattered in his lectures, may very probably have been the demand which the practice of his profession made upon his time, as well as the period which elapsed between the delivery of each. But whatever these may have been, it is one source of their ineffectiveness; another is, that his practice aimed lower than his principles, and men that have been distinguished are looked up to by the world. It is their example which will ever exercise the greater influence on the mass: should it unfortunately fall short of their precepts, it must in a great measure negative their teachings.

Art, too, was a theme which had had, before his time, but little attention in this country; so that his career was left chiefly to the guidance of his own strong perceptions, unaided by advantages such as are conferred on a subject, by the concentration of many minds.

The circumstance of the primitive demands on artistic talent being that of portraiture in England, would have rendered it impossible, under such conditions, that his practice could have been otherwise than chiefly confined to that limited but important branch of the art.

That the powers of his capacious mind had been bounded by circumstances only, is evinced on his arrival in Italy. The works of Raffaelle and Michelangelo appeared at first strange to him. The glories of this museum of art caused the iris of his mind's eye instinctively to veil the astonished sense; but when it had again gently expanded, in adapting itself to the diffused and brilliant light of this (to him) new and foreign land of art, he rapturously beheld the charming prospect stretching out in all its beauty before him.

There, too, he might have discerned the master minds who had preceded him, resting at different distances on the high road to perfection, farther advanced than himself only from the favouring chariot of circumstances having helped them on their way.

With an observing mind, however, he busied himself in recording precedents of the practice of the old masters: but his own, not necessitating him to dive deeper for universal principles than the citing of these, form a third source of failure, from his precepts being founded on the authority of human imitation rather than drawn from their first source in universal nature: for instance, in his notes to "Du Fresnoy" he expresses this conviction, but concludes his "Discourses" by recommending above all the study of Michelangelo. "Notwithstanding man's highest convictions, the struggle between reason and fancy is always a hard one."

There are other sources of evil in his practice, not as yet referred to, viz., carelessness in execution, and incorrectness in drawing, as there are not wanting in his works frequent instances of both, which many have found it convenient to imitate, especially when sanctioned by such an authority.

If painting has suffered from this looking back, it has been no less the case with sculpture. Flaxman, who deserves all honour due to the pure in spirit, could he have foreseen the ill effects, the but partial embodiment of his charming ideas would have had upon the arts, I fear we should not have possessed them; for, in perceiving the vision of his idolators, would he not have directed them to look far beyond himself? This indiscriminate worship has led to the perpetuation of his mannerisms, and the incomplete execution of his works has been unction to the conscience of the dilatory. His outlines, too, have given rise to attempts in bas-relief beyond the limits of its art, many of them having been designed neither with reference to painting nor sculpture, but ideas expressed (*per se*) as outlines, executed without any immediate reference to nature, more than memory might serve him either for the figures or draperies.

In the attempts to follow him, the fashion of angelic drapery seems to have received an eternal stamp, and bodies intended to be of a spiritual nature, with long habits, a twist and a flutter, soaring up, then sinking down, have become, since his time, familiar subjects for the exercise of the chisel.

That a mind fertile in invention must be possessed in all the arts as the prime mover, there can be little doubt; but it is the kind of machinery employed by each that confers a different title on its constructor,—and the greater its completeness the greater will be the certainty of its performing its end.

Now, completeness embraces the perfection of every particular; and in proportion as these particulars are neglected in a work of art, it is defective.

In fact, it appears self-evident that a beautiful idea, tolerably expressed, is something to be esteemed; if better—more esteemed; if completely—most esteemed.

But let error ever be held up to animadversion, especially in the great; and let the plausibility which greatness would seem to confer on it be carefully guarded against.

It becomes the more important to allude to this tendency to incompleteness in an age when it is often exclaimed, "'Tis the idea, and not its embodiment." If this were true, the painter and sculptor had better change their titles to that of author or poet,—for beauty of idea is also demanded of these. Wherein, then, consists the difference? if it be not, in the one case, a choice and careful arrangement of words, and in the other of forms and colours. Even a scribbler or rhymester may have excellent ideas; but, not knowing how to convey them to others, they receive these designations, instead of that of author and poet. It is the degree of perfection with which each art expresses an idea in the means peculiarly allotted to it, that constitutes excellence in either. If it were otherwise, it would be better that the painter and sculptor wrote—the one on his canvass and the other on his marble—the purpose intended, without troub-

* See p. 447 *ante*.

† See Builder, Vol. V. p. 394.

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